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Shirley Maria Batista

The Calling

I can hear them.

I'm four. I'm climbing the little gigantic guava tree with my brother. Food and playground. The sugar canes in the back of the house are whispering. It's about our little secret: they will never tell father. I asked them and they promised. He hasn't said anything yet. He'll never know.

I'm five. Mommy doesn't want to cry in front of me. I'm crying. I told father that she was sad because of his bottles and asked him to stop or he would not be my daddy anymore. I felt tall, like one of those big bamboos back at grandpa's. But father taught me a lesson and now I'm here, with urine still running down my legs. It's ok. Mommy's here, my bay tree. She takes my pain away. She's strong, she knows things and she tells me that she loves me. I'm six, seven, eight. I'm free. We are free. The scent of the red earth is stronger here and the sound of the river can be heard from everywhere. The boys are looking for birds' nests but I'm busy talking to the inga tree. She's calling me: the ingas are sweeter this season and she wants me to have the first taste.

I'm nine. I cannot remember what mommy told me this morning before leaving for school: will she be home? Or should I go to auntie's? I look around: the trees on the sidewalk are busy: too many people going up and down. The cemetery's big tree is waving at me. She's a wise one, I'll ask her.

I'm ten, eleven, twelve. So many things changed. At least I have my mango tree. I build my first home here. My brother prefers the sugar-apple tree, but he fell down and broke his arm while trying to jump from a branch to another. He wasn't listening carefully. The big old mango tree in the back keeps telling me to climb up there; she has things to show me.

I'm thirteen. I've changed. I don't hear them anymore. Did they stop talking?

I'm fourteen. I am going away, far away across the ocean. I feel like I have sailed these waters before. Never-ending echoes propagate from down below. Familiar sounds. Everything has changed. I've reached an old land, that is what they say. Aren't all lands old? Green, yellow fields where plants are lined up like soldiers awaiting some kind of order. Fragile red flowers pop up like fireflies in the dark. Cypresses stand like bridges between worlds. Seasons have different faces; the naked aspens make me shiver: why are they so static? Do those geometrical lines chain their roots?



Fig. 1. Elisa Ponta, *Trees* (2020).

I'm eighteen, nineteen, twenty ... I keep hearing something but I don't know what it is. Everywhere I go, I stop and look at the trees that I find on my way. I feel the urge to touch their trunks, feel the hardness of their barks, dip my hands in their leaves, read them as if there is some kind of message left there for me. What I find is an ancient code that I'm not able to decipher.

I'm twenty-six. I'm crossing the ocean again. The echoes are still there. What I hear is the kiskadee welcoming me back to the red earth. Then I look up and see them: of different sizes, different shapes, dancing, connecting as if they were singing together. As soon as I see a mango tree, I climb up the trunk and sit on one of the lower branches. I look for an old feeling but it struggles to emerge. I hug the acacia and close my eyes imagining the golden clusters that I will not see – I arrived a season later. I look for an *urukum* tree, the wellspring of the red treasure of wiser peoples. I try to make new memories while holding strong on the old ones. Everything has changed, even the trees.

I'm twenty seven. I'm planting my roots while interlacing them with others that I've lived with for ten years now. We become one.

I'm twenty-eight. I'm having bad seasons. What if my roots are not strong enough? What if this soil is not the right one for me? Which is the right one? Is this my trunk? Why are my leaves falling down? They've taken a piece of my bark away, a precaution, before it turns into something bad, they say. No flowers, no fruits, no seeds. I'm in the shadows. No sunlight can reach me. I feel as if I'm decomposing. I'm losing balance and falling down.

I'm twenty-nine. I'm about to hit the ground when I sense it: one little seed. My roots pull me back and hold me tight. I feel all the power of the universe pervading my whole being. The seed of rebirth sprouts: life explosion.

I'm thirty. I have a little tree to take care of.

Can she hear them?

She is four months. She receives a young holm oak as a gift for her birth.

She is eight months. She touches the leaves of her tree on her own for the first time.

She is nine months. She turns the pages of a book bigger than her as if she's done it for a life time. Her favourite corner of the house is our bookshelf.

She is ten months and wants to see the trees: "(tr)eee", "(tr)eee", "(tr)eee!". At the park she just wants to stay near the trees, touching them, touching the leaves.

She is one and all she wants are books, leaves and trees.

She is a year and a half. She watches me while I'm studying, highlighting book passages with a marker. She does the same: she lays on her stomach on the floor and draws worlds on empty pages. At the park, she wants to play hide and seek behind the trees. We start drawing together and the first thing I draw with her is a tree. Every day she wants to draw trees: "mamma, t(r)ee!". Then we start painting, and she wants to paint trees.

She is two. Now she draws faces. She asks me to draw trees and she draws faces on trees. They are calling.

I'm thirty-one. I've started the metamorphosis.

I've learned about worlds crossing the ocean on ships.

I've learned about languages constructing worlds.

I've learned about a child being a teacher to a man trying to find himself again.

I've learned about peoples living in complete communion with nature.

I've learned about finding reality through dreams and imagination.

I've learned about the language of trees.

I've learned about trees talking to each other.

I've learned about trees talking to humans who can listen.

I'm thirty-two. I'm ready.

I am a tree. A young holm oak is my teacher.

Can you hear them?

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